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ABSTRACT

The author examines maternal employment as a complex process and as one of a number of variables that affects the child. The effects of a working mother on several variables concerned with a child's adjustment are also discussed. Other areas explored involve the relationship between a child's family adjustment and academic achievement as well as the effects the presence of a working mother in the household has on those variables. In addition, a measure of sex-role stereotyping, administered to determine the effect of maternal employment on a child's sex-role perceptions, is also presented. (VG)

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EFFECTS OF WORKING MOTHERS ON CHILDREN*

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Maternal employment is now widespread and prevalent at all socioeconomic levels. Along with the growing number of women in the working force, an increasing concern for the welfare of their children has developed. Research in this area has been characterized by confusion and contradictions. Maternal employment has been associated with positive effects, negative effects and no effects at all. It appears that many of these inconsistencies can be attributed to a propensity for assuming a direct, causal relationship between the work status of the mother and a dependent variable, ignoring other relevant factors.

After reviewing the literature on the effects of working mothers on children, it became clear that to categorize mothers in terms of employment status alone, and then to look at some child variable, is not a fruitful or effective way to research this area. There seemed to be a need to identify intervening variables and to experimentally treat maternal employment as the complex phenomenon that it is. The theory behind my study was that the distance between an antecedent condition like maternal employment and a child characteristic is too great to be examined in a single leap. Several levels should be explored in any study aiming to obtain insight into the processes involved.

The goal of the present investigation was to examine maternal employment as a complex process and as one of a number of variables that affects a child. The effects of a working mother on several variables concerned with a child's adjustment were examined. The relationship between a child's family adjustment and academic achievement was explored, as well as the effects the presence of a working mother in the household has on those variables. In addition, a measure of sex-role stereotyping was administered to determine the effect of maternal employment on a child's sex-role perceptions.

Dependent variables were grades, I.Q., academic achievement, family adjustment, and sex-role stereotype scores. A multiple regression design was employed in order to determine the role of several independent variables in the prediction of the above dependent variables. This permitted consideration of variables both separately and simultaneously.

Through this study I aimed to show that mother's work status alone would not be correlated with academic achievement, but would be influential when considered in conjunction with other independent variables. I also aimed to show that length of time

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the mother was employed and the child care arrangements made, would be more successful predictors of the dependent variables than knowledge of work status alone. Family adjustment of the child was hypothesized to be a crucial variable. It was expected that the predictive power of maternal work status on academic achievement would differ across different levels of family adjustment and that at optimum adjustment, work status would be an irrelevant variable. With regard to sex-role stereotyping, it was expected that the children of working mothers would subscribe significantly less to sex-role stereotypes than their peers with nonworking mothers.

The subjects in this study were 321 seventh and eighth grade students from three different school systems in New York and New Jersey. They were predominantly white, middle class and 70% of the sample had working mothers. Each subject completed a questionnaire concerned with personal data about the family and mother's work history. They were also asked to complete the Elias Family Adjustment Test, and a sex-role stereotype scale. These were administered during health classes and in a group setting. Information on academic achievement was obtained from school records. I.Q. scores and grade point averages were converted to standard scores separately for each school, in order to equalize the effects of different grading systems in the different schools. An index of achievement was then obtained for each child by comparing their standard scores for I.Q. and academic achievement. So, if a child was at the mean of his group with respect to I.Q. and also at the mean with respect to grades, it was assumed that he was achieving satisfactorilly. A child higher in achievement than in I.Q. was considered an overachiever, while the reverse situation indicated an underachiever.

The independent variables which were examined in this study included sex and age of the child, presence of adults in the home (in addition to the parents), present work status of the mother, length of employment, child care arrangements, father's education, mother's education, socioeconomic status, marital status of the parents, and number of siblings. These variables were grouped in various ways and regression equations were computed for the total sample and for the three schools separately. In addition, subjects were classified into three groups according to their scores on the Family Adjustment Test and regression equations on achievement were calculated to see if the influence of work status of the mother differed in the different groups.

One of the most striking results of this study was the finding that the subjects could not be regarded as a homogeneous group, despite the similarities in age and grade. Treating them as one group only served to obscure the different patterns that emerged when each school was examined separately. This, in itself, might account for many of the conclusions of earlier researchers who found that maternal employment had no effects at all. In all three groups, work status of the mother was not

significantly correlated with achievement. Contrary to what was hypothesized, when considered in conjunction with other independent variables, knowing whether or not a mother worked did not facilitate prediction of achievement in a significant manner. Length of employment and child care arrangements did prove to be more important information than work status alone in some of the regressions, in particular with respect to I.Q. scores. Family adjustment, contrary to expectation, also failed to be a significant predictor of academic achievement in any of the schools. While there is not sufficient time here to discuss the importance of the individual variables explored, this part of my results can be summarized by stating that only one factor proved to be important in all of the three groups--and this was marital status of the parents. Coming from a single parent family was related to lower academic achievement.

When the sample as a whole was divided according to their family adjustment scores, interesting results emerged with respect to academic achievement. The subjects scoring in the "normal" adjustment range, according to previously published norms, had a mean achievement score indicating satisfactory achievement. The subjects scoring in the "poor" adjustment range had a mean achievement score indicating underachievement. Surprisingly, those subjects whose scores indicated unrealistic or overly defensive responses to the Family Adjustment Test, had a mean achievement score indicative of substantial overachievement. It seems that this last group of children are not only committed to portraying a rosy, if unrealistic, picture of their family life, but also expend considerable energy in conforming to academic standards. Family adjustment then, was related to academic performance in the predicted direction, but at each of these levels work status was unrelated to achievement and seemed to be an irrelevant variable.

With respect to sex-role stereotyping, there was no significant difference between the children of working and nonworking mothers with respect to the sex-role stereotyping of males and females. However, there were two variables clearly related to the degree to which children sex-type both male and female roles. These were the educational level of the mother and the marital status of the parents. The less education the mother has, the more likely a child is to see males and females in a stereotyped way. And children from intact families stereotype more. This lends support to the theory that it is the parents who serve as models with respect to sex roles. More educated women are more likely to reject traditional feminine roles and a single parent, by necessity, must function in a non-traditional way. However, as was mentioned before, employment of the mother was not found to be related to sex-role scores. Here again, work status must be viewed within a larger context as just one of a number of variables that affect a child's attitudes and values.

What can we conclude from these results about the effects of working mothers on children? We must conclude that there is no universal EFFECT of working mothers on children--that there is a complex and delicate balance between numerous factors, only some

of which were explored here, that determines a child's reactions to his mother's activities. A working mother is definitely not the monolithic negative influence that some previous research purports her to be. However, she also is not a positive force simply by virtue of her work status, as many assert she is. For most children, with regards to academic achievement and the other variables explored here, maternal employment seems to have no measurable effect and is less important a variable than some others presented here; for example the marital status of the parents. In addition, an important conclusion to draw from this study is the inadvisability of generalizing from one sample to another.

Some of the inconsistencies in my study may have been due to the fact that very different kinds of women were grouped together on the basis of work status alone. I think it would be helpful in the future, to further differentiate working status of the mother so that the type of work the mother did, the social status of her job, her attitude towards working, her husband's attitude towards her employment and her feelings about mothering are considered. Perhaps in this way the effects on children will be more clear.

In conclusion, I feel that the value of this particular study lies in its approach to the issue. Certainly more research and exploration is needed to identify the important intervening factors between maternal employment and a child's behavior; and this study is a beginning.